



Date and Time: Wednesday, May 24, 2023 10:53:00AM PDT

Job Number: 197793337

Document (1)

1. [*This Earth Day let's replace alarmism with smarter policy*](#)

Client/Matter: -None-

Search Terms: eco-anxiety

Search Type: Natural Language

Narrowed by:

Content Type
News

Narrowed by

Sources: National Post (f/k/a The Financial Post)(Canada);
Timeline: Jan 01, 2018 to May 23, 2023; All Content Types:
News; Geography by Document: North America;
Geography by Document: Canada

This Earth Day let's replace alarmism with smarter policy

National Post (f/k/a The Financial Post) (Canada)

April 22, 2021 Thursday

National Edition

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Section: FP COMMENT; Pg. FP24

Length: 847 words

Byline: Bjorn Lomborg, Financial Post

Body

This Earth Day, dramatic warnings about climate change will be ubiquitous. At his climate summit, U.S. President Joe Biden will undoubtedly repeat that global warming presents an "existential threat."

But most of the hype will be vastly exaggerated. This pervasive climate alarmism is the culmination of persistent **eco-anxiety** over the past few decades. Already in 1982, the United Nations was predicting that, along with other environmental concerns, climate change could cause worldwide "devastation as complete, as irreversible as any nuclear holocaust" by the year 2000. Needless to say, that didn't happen.

Today, almost every catastrophe is blamed on global warming, and we are being told that we must radically change the entire world until 2030 to avoid the apocalypse. Such irresponsible exaggerations are destroying our ability to make sensible decisions for the future. The evidence actually shows that climate-related disasters are killing far fewer people than ever before. Over the past century, the number of dead from floods, droughts, storms, wildfire and extreme temperatures has dropped by an incredible 98 per cent.

And the much-discussed 2030 deadline to fix climate change is wrong, too. It relies on an arbitrary policy that no major nation is actually pursuing. Moreover, the claim of apocalypse is vastly exaggerated. The UN Climate Panel estimates that the average person in half a century will be 363 per cent as rich as today. When they include all the impacts of climate change, the increase in well-being will instead be equivalent to 356 per cent of today's incomes. That is a problem, not the end of the world.

Climate change is real and human-caused, and it is a problem we should tackle smartly. But rabid hyperbole scares us witless and in our panic we make expensive but poor policy choices, leaving the world much worse off.

The Paris Agreement has been marketed as the solution to climate, yet, by the United Nation's own reckoning, it will accomplish almost nothing. In a best-case scenario, it will achieve just one per cent of what political leaders have promised. And no major nation is on-track to actually deliver on its promises.

The Paris agreement is phenomenally expensive, costing US\$1-2 trillion every year by 2030. But even if all nations actually kept their promises, including Barack Obama's for the U.S., and also stuck to them through the rest of the century, the impact would be an almost immeasurable 0.19°C reduction in temperatures by the end of the century. The cost would vastly outweigh the benefit: each dollar spent would avoid just 11 cents worth of global climate damage.

But there is another cost to excessively focusing on climate in a world that is full of problems. COVID-19 showed us how worrying mostly about climate leaves us poorly prepared for all the other global challenges. The World Health Organization itself fell prey, which is perhaps one of the reasons it seemed to be blindsided by coronavirus.

This Earth Day let's replace alarmism with smarter policy

When U.S. National Climate Advisor Gina McCarthy warns us that climate is the "most significant public health challenge of our time" she effectively ignores much bigger health problems. A third of all U.S. deaths are caused by cardiovascular disease and more than a quarter by cancer. In comparison, just a third of one per cent are caused by heat deaths - compared to the almost seven per cent who die from cold each year. Extreme weather kills just 0.015 per cent.

The world's poor battle with much greater challenges: starvation, poverty, dying from easily curable diseases and lack of education. And these challenges have solutions where each dollar spent can help much more. Spending just a thousandth of the cost of the Paris agreement could save more than a million people from dying of tuberculosis. Each dollar would do more than a thousand times more good than when spent poorly on climate.

Similarly, we could do phenomenally much better at much lower cost helping children out of malnutrition or improving learning in schools. We could address most of the world's top issues with just a fraction of what we're spending on climate.

Earth Day reaffirms that we should care about the planet and its inhabitants and reminds us that we should tackle climate. But we need to do so smarter and more effectively. We shouldn't continue, and we certainly shouldn't ramp up, our massive subsidies to inefficient electric cars and solar and wind power. Instead, we need to spend much more on green innovation. If we can innovate the price of future green energy down to below the cost of fossil fuels, then not just rich Canadians, but everyone - in China, India and Africa - will switch to green energy.

Let's refocus Earth Day away from exaggerated climate alarmism toward straightforward effective solutions.

Bjorn Lomborg is president of the Copenhagen Consensus and a visiting Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His new book is False Alarm - How Climate Change Panic Costs Us Trillions, Hurts the Poor, and Fails to Fix the Planet. !@COPYRIGHT=© 2021 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: News

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: CLIMATE CHANGE (90%); EARTH DAY (90%); GLOBAL WARMING (90%); AGREEMENTS (89%); UNITED NATIONS (89%); ACCIDENTS & DISASTERS (78%); CLIMATE CHANGE REGULATION & POLICY (78%); ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES (78%); EXTREME TEMPERATURES (78%); NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS (78%); WEATHER (78%); ENVIRONMENTAL ACCIDENTS & DISASTERS (75%); MILLENNIUM (75%); UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTIONS (71%); WILDFIRES (71%); COVID CORONAVIRUS (67%); COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS (50%); earth,dramatic,warnings,climate,change,ubiquitous (%)

Industry: GLOBAL WARMING (90%)

Person: BARACK OBAMA (79%); JOE BIDEN (79%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (92%)

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Load-Date: April 22, 2021

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